

First Things First

The Lord Jesus delivered his Great Commission to his disciples in AD33: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...” (Matthew 28:19).

Luke’s version of the commission is: “Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to **all nations**, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46,47).

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts1:8).

So what happened after that? We know the gospel was preached “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria” but was “repentance and remission of sins” preached to all nations?

Most, if not all, biblical scholars are agreed that Saul of Tarsus became a follower of Jesus in AD35, about two years after the twelve apostles had been entrusted with the Great Commission.

Saul first visited Jerusalem in AD38, three years after his Damascus Road experience: “... after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days. (Gal 1:18)

Fourteen years later, in AD52, Paul made a second visit to Jerusalem. On that occasion he went for the express purpose of explaining his ministry among the Gentiles (i.e. “the nations”): “After fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem ... and communicated to them that **gospel which I preach among the Gentiles** ...” (Galatians 2:1f)

While in Jerusalem, “James, Cephas, and John ... gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that **we should go to the Gentiles** and they to the circumcised. They desired only that we should remember the poor...” (Galatians 2:9f)

This means that, almost two decades after the Great Commission, only one apostle was reaching out to Gentiles! Paul had a unique ministry. In Romans 11, he described himself as “an apostle to **the Gentiles**” (Romans 11:13).

After Saul met the risen Messiah on the road to Damascus, the disciple Ananias, was told to “Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before **Gentiles**, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name’s sake.” (Acts 9:15f)

Later in his life, when giving an account of this experience, he told King Agrippa about his call to “**the Gentiles**, to whom I am sending you ...’ So, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision...” (Acts 26:17-19).

In Jerusalem, Peter, James and John “... they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to **the Gentiles** and they to the circumcised” (Galatians 2:9).

Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles began when “the Holy Spirit said, ‘Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for **the work to which I have called them**’.” (Acts 13:1,2)

Paul, the only apostle to the Gentiles, set out with Barnabas and, “being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and ... when they arrived in Salamis, they preached the word of God in **the synagogues** of the Jews” (Acts 13:3-5).

The first mission to the nations begins in the synagogues of Cyprus, and Paul's mission to the Gentiles consistently follows the pattern of Romans 1:16. Although Paul told Agrippa that he "did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision..." (Acts 26: 19), at face value, it seems that he did disobey the heavenly vision because although he was sent to the Gentiles, he always preached to the Jews first. Why? Because the gospel "is the power of God for salvation ... **to the Jew first** and also to the Greek. (Romans 1:16).

In Pisidian Antioch, Paul and Barnabbas again "on the Sabbath day they went into **the synagogue**" (Acts 13:14) and there he declared: "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken **to you first** ..." (Acts 13:45f).

In Iconium "... they went together to **the synagogue** of the ... a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks believe" (Acts 14:1f).

At Philippi, "on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the [Jewish] women who met there" (Acts 16:12f).

In Thessalonica there was "**a synagogue** of the Jews. Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures ... Messiah had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, '... Jesus is the Messiah'" (Acts 17:1ff).

At Berea "they went into **the synagogue** of the Jews ... [the Bereans] received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. Therefore many of them believed" (Acts 17:10f).

"While Paul waited for [Silas and Timothy] at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. Therefore he reasoned in **the synagogue** with the Jews ... and in the marketplace daily" (Acts 17:16f).

In the capital city of Gentile learning and culture, Paul's spirit was provoked when he saw the educated, cultured Athenian intellectuals worshipping a multiplicity of gods, yet he first of all reasoned in the one place in Athens where there were no false gods, the synagogue.

In Corinth, "he reasoned in **the synagogue** every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks. When Silas and Timothy had come from Macedonia, Paul was compelled by the Spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus is the Messiah" (Acts 18:4f).

Paul "...came to Ephesus, and ... he himself entered **the synagogue** and reasoned with the Jews" (Acts 18:19).

Even when Paul arrived in Rome, where there was a church, his priority remained unchanged:

"After three days ...Paul called the leaders of **the Jews** together. So when they had come together, he said to them: "Men and brethren ... for the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain" (Acts 28:18-20).

Contrary to what we imagine, mission in the early Church was to the Jew first. In fact, eleven apostles (twelve, if you count Matthias) took the gospel to the Jews almost exclusively and did not feel they were in any way disobeying the Lord's great commission. The one apostle who was specifically commissioned to take the gospel to the Gentiles out of necessity preached the Good News to the Jew first.

Today, we take the gospel to the Gentiles first and secondly, if at all, the Jews. In fact, some even question whether we should preach Jesus to the Jews at all! When did the gospel stop being to the Jew first?

The tragic truth is that the Church forgotten a basic principle of evangelism and mission, that the gospel is (present tense) to the Jew first. All the promises of Messiah were made to them. All the promises of redemption in the Hebrew Scriptures were addressed to them. The New Covenant of Jeremiah 31:31ff was promised to “the house of Israel and the house of Judah”. The Church must recover this vital principle of mission if it is not to be guilty of disobedience to the heavenly commission.